

Message Text

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ACTION SS-30

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 /031 W

----- 025581

R 051155Z JAN 74

FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4093

INFO USINT ALGIERS

USMISSION GENEVA

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY RABAT

AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 0053

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, TS; US

SUBJECT: MASMOUDI CONCERNED ABOUT BOURGUIBA'S HEALTH

1. SUMMARY: FONMIN MOHAMED MASMOUDI, WHO APPEARS TO HAVE GOOD REASON TO BELIEVE HIS DAYS AS FONMIN ARE NUMBERED, (SEPTEL) SPENT FIRST PART OF ONE-AND -ONE-HALF HOUR MEETING WITH ME ON JANUARY 4 UNBURDENING HIMSELF ON DECLINE IN PRESIDENT BOURGUIBA'S HEALTH AND CONSEQUENCES THIS MIGHT HAVE FOR TUNISIA. MEETING WAS AT MY REQUEST. MASMOUDI STRESSED THAT BOURGUIBA IS PHYSICALLY STRONG BUT HIS MENTAL LAPSES AND PREOCCUPATION WITH PERSONAL GRUDGES SHOWED SIGNS OF MENTAL DEBILITATION THAT DID NOT AUGUR WELL FOR TUNISIA. HE PARTICULARLY CONCERNED THAT BOURGUIBA TAKING ON MORE AND MORE FOREIGN TRAVEL ENGAGEMENTS WHICH ARE STRAIN ON HIM AND CAN HAVE CONSEQUENCES ON TUNISIA'S IMAGE IN WORLD. HE SAID MAIN HOPE IS THAT WHEN BOURGUIBA HAS MEDICAL CHECKUP IN GENEVA ON JANUARY 15 HIS DOCTORS WILL PREVAIL UPON HIM TO CUT DOWN ON ALL ACTIVITY. IF DOCTORS CAN CONVINCE HIM TO REDUCE ACTIVITY, HE COULD ASSUME ROLE SIMILAR TO THAT OF MAO TSE TUNG IN CHINA FOR REMAINDER OF HIS LIFE WITHOUT STEPPING DOWN FROM PRESIDENCY. MASMOUDI IS FIRST HIGH-CONFIDENTIAL

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LEVEL GOT OFFICIAL TO TALK WITH US SO FREELY ABOUT PRESIDENT'S HEALTH, WHICH CONFIRMS OUR OWN VIEWS THAT BOURGUIBA HAS DECLINED MENTALLY IN PAST FEW MONTHS AND DETERIORATION COULD CONTINUE IF HE DOES NOT SLOW DOWN HIS PACE. WHETHER

DOCTORS CAN USE GENEVA CHECKUP TO ARREST THIS DETERIORATION
REMAINS TO BE SEEN. END SUMMARY.

2. IN MEETING WHICH I REQUESTED, MASMOUDI BEGAN BY SAYING HE WAS TIRED FROM RECENT TRIPS IN AFRICA AND EUROPE AND FELT REAL NEED FOR REST. WHEN I REMARKED THAT BOURGUIBA ALSO APPEARED TIRED WHEN HE RETURNED FROM ALGIERS, MASMOUDI AGREED AND SAID BOURGUIBA IS PUSHING HIMSELF TOO MUCH LATELY AND EFFECTS ARE SHOWING. HE SAID VISIT TO ALGIERS WAS PARTICULARLY DISAPPOINTING IN THIS REGARD. HE SAID BOURGUIBA IN TELEVISED SPEECH MADE SOME SLIGHTING REMARKS ABOUT BLACK AFRICANS IN GENERAL AND ZAIRE LEADERS IN PARTICULAR. BOURGUIBA RIDICULED LARGE RIVER BOAT WHICH USED BY PRESIDENT MOBUTO. BOURGUIBA ALSO REFUSED TO VISIT TOMB OF ALGERIAN HERO EMIR ABDELKHADER WHO BOURGUIBA TERMED A TRAITOR. MASMOUDI INDICATED THIS WAS PARTICULAR AFFRONT TO PRESIDENT BOUMEDIENE WHO LARGELY RESPONSIBLE FOR HAVING TOMB ERECTED AND ABDELKHADER'S REMAINS RETURNED TO ALGIERS. BOURGUIBA ALSO TRIED TO VERIFY THAT BOUMEDIENE HAD BEEN STUDENT OF MAHMOUD CHARCHOUR, OLD TUNISIAN PSD MILITANT AND NOW AMBASSADOR TO KUWAIT, WHO NOT HIGHLY REGARDED FOR HIS INTELLECT. MASMOUDI SAID BOUMEDIENE DENIED HE WAS FORMER STUDENT OF CHARCHOUR. MASMOUDI IMPLIED VISIT HAD DONE LITTLE TO IMPROVE TUNISIAN-ALGERIAN RELATIONS AT TOP LEVEL.

3. MASMOUDI SAID HE CONCERNED ABOUT BOURGUIBA'S INCREASING PLANS FOR MORE FOREIGN TRAVEL. A TRIP TO THE U.S. IS OKAY BUT NOT ALSO TO THE USSR AND CHINA. HE FEELS BOURGUIBA IS TAKING ON TOO MUCH FOR PURPOSE OF PROVING TO EVERYONE HE IS COMPLETELY RECOVERED AND CAN HANDLE ALL ASPECTS OF THE PRESIDENCY. MASMOUDI ACKNOWLEDGED THAT HIS PHYSICAL STAMINA AND VIGOR ARE REMARKABLE BUT HIS MENTAL FACULTIES DO NOT SEEM TO BE EQUALLY STRONG. MASMOUDI SAID NUMBER OF RECENT INTERNAL ACTIONS OF BOURGUIBA AND MIN INTERIOR BELKHODJA HAD BEEN CONFIDENTIAL

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UNSETTLING. HE CITED BOURGUIBA'S RECENT CRITICISM OF BAHY LADGHAM, FACT LADGHAM'S PASSPORT WAS WITHDRAWN ON HIS RETURN FROM CAIRO, RECENT ARREST OF STUDENTS INCLUDING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS, PUBLIC ADMISSION THAT ASSASSINATION OF SALAH BEN YOUSSEF HAD BEEN PLANNED BY PEOPLE CLOSE TO BOURGUIBA, LATTER'S PUBLIC ATTACKS ON AHMED BEN SALAH AND THREAT TO ORGANIZE HIS ASSASSINATION BY SOME MEN WHO KILLED BEN YOUSSEF. ALL OF THIS HE SAID IS CAUSING UNFAVORABLE LOCAL REACTIONS -- PEOPLE IN "COFFEE-HOUSES" ARE COMPLAINING.

4. IN RESPONSE TO MY QUESTION AS TO WHETHER BOURGUIBA'S CLOSE ADVISORS MIGHT TRY HARDER TO INFLUENCE HIM,

MASMOUDI SAID BOURGUIBA LISTENS TO ADVICE OF HIS MINISTERS BUT THEN DOES WHAT HE WANTS TO AFTER THEY ARE GONE. HE SAID BOURGUIBA'S PERSONAL SECRETARY ALALA LAOUITI HAS NEGATIVE INFLUENCE ON BOURGUIBA. ALSO HE SAID BOURGUIBA JR. SEEMS TO HOLD VIEW THAT PRESIDENT SHOULD BE MORE RATHER THAN LESS ACTIVE. MASMOUDI SAID HE FEARS BOURGUIBA'S VISIT TO SALZBURG FOR CONFERENCE ON SOCIALISM, SCHEDULED FOR FEBRUARY, WILL BE OCCASION FOR BOURGUIBA DIATRIBE ON BEN SALAH AND INDIRECT ATTACK ON SOCIALISM AS PRACTISED BY BEN SALAH. IMPLICATION IS THAT THIS WOULD NOT HELP TUNISIAN RELATIONS WITH EUROPEAN SOCIALIST GOVERNMENTS, PARTICULARLY AUSTRIANS.

5. MASMOUDI SAID MAIN HOPE IS THAT WHEN BOURGUIBA GOES TO GENEVA ON JANUARY 15 FOR MEDICAL CHECKUP HIS DOCTORS WILL BE ABLE TO CONVINCE HIM HE MUST CURB HIS ACTIVITY OR RISK REAL DETERIORATION IN HIS HEALTH. PRESIDENT PAYS CLOSE ATTENTION TO DOCTORS' ADVICE. IF DOCTORS ISSUE STRICT ORDERS SHARPLY LIMITING HIS ACTIVITY, BOURGUIBA MIGHT HEED THEM. IF NO, HIS MINISTERS COLLECTIVELY COULD TELL BOURGUIBA THAT FOR HIS OWN HEALTH THEY WOULD INSIST THAT HE CARRY OUT DOCTORS' ORDERS. HOWEVER, MASMOUDI EMPHASIZED IT MUST BE THE DOCTORS WHO PRESCRIBE THESE RESTRICTIONS FOR OBVIOUS REASONS. WHEN I QUERIED IF BOURGUIBA MIGHT NOT BE WILLING TO ASSUME A POSITION OF EMINENCE GRISE WHO STAYED IN THE BACKGROUND AND LET CURRENT MINISTERS RUN THE AFFAIRS OF STATE, MASMOUDI SAID THIS WAS WHAT HE HOPED WOULD HAPPEN. HE SAID CONFIDENTIAL

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SITUATION OF MAE TSE TUNG OFFERS EXAMPLE WHICH BOURGUIBA MIGHT ADOPT. ON MAJOR STATE OCCASIONS HE WOULD PLAY A PROMINENT ROLE BUT FOR THE MOST PART HE WOULD BE RETIRED FROM PUBLIC VIEW.

6. AT ONE POINT MASMOUDI ALLUDED BRIEFLY TO POSSIBILITY OF MILITARY TAKEOVER SHOULD BOURGUIBA'S HEALTH DETERIORATE BADLY, BUT HE DID NOT EXPOUND FURTHER. HE SAID THAT TUNISIA HAS LITTLE TO FEAR FROM ITS FOREIGN NEIGHBORS (WHO COULD CONCEIVABLY CAPITALIZE ON POSSIBLE INTERNAL TUNISIAN PROBLEMS). TUNISIA'S MAIN CONCERN IS WITHIN ITS BOUNDARIES.

7. COMMENT: MASMOUDI IS FIRST HIGH-LEVEL GOT OFFICIAL TO TALK TO US SO FRANKLY ABOUT PRESIDENT'S HEALTH. MASMOUDI NO DOUBT FEELS HIS OWN POSITION IS THREATENED (SEPTTEL) BUT HE HAS BEEN IN THIS SITUATION BEFORE AND THIS ALONE COULD NOT ACCOUNT FOR HIS CANDOR IN DISCUSSING BOURGUIBA'S HEALTH. HE APPEARS TO BE GENUINELY CONCERNED THAT BOURGUIBA IS WEAKENING NOTABLY AND THAT IF HIS DOCTORS DON'T REIN HIM IN, HE WILL DO HARM TO HIS IMAGE AND TO THAT OF TUNISIA. MASMOUDI'S BRIEF ALLUSION TO THE POSSIBILITY OF A MILITARY TAKEOVER COULD HAVE REFERENCE

EITHER TO A LIBYAN-TYPE PUTSCH OR TO THE MORE LIKELY
ALTERNATIVE OF THE GOT LEADERSHIP'S CALLING ON THE
BOURGEOIS-ORIENTED MILITARY OFFICER CORPS TO HELP KEEP
THE LID ON. WE DO NOT THINK THIS IS A PROBABILITY
BUT IT IS AN ULTIMATE EVENTUALITY WAY DOWN THE ROAD
IF BOURGUIBA'S HEALTH DETERIORATES RAPIDLY AND HIS
SUPPORTERS ARE UNABLE TO PULL THEMSELVES TOGETHER AND
RULE EFFECTIVELY. WE BELIEVE THAT MASMOUDI IS
EXAGGERATING THE POTENTIAL DANGER BECAUSE OF HIS OWN
PERSONAL SITUATION, ALTHOUGH BOURGUIBA'S MENTAL DECLINE
WOULD INDEED WORSEN IF HE DOES NOT SLOW DOWN HIS PACE.
MASMOUDI GAVE EVERY INDICATION OF BEING SINCERE IN HIS
CONCERNS FOR BOURGUIBA AND TUNISIA'S FUTURE.
SEELYE

CONFIDENTIAL

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: Z
Capture Date: 27 JUL 1999
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: POLITICAL LEADERS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 05 JAN 1974
Decaption Date: 28 MAY 2004
Decaption Note: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Authority: golinofr
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 28 MAY 2004
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1974TUNIS00053
Document Source: ADS
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: 11652 GDS
Errors: n/a
Film Number: P750004-0200
From: TUNIS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1974/newtext/t19740174/abbrzalg.tel
Line Count: 179
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, TEXT ON MICROFILM
Office: ACTION SS
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 4
Previous Channel Indicators:
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: EXDIS
Reference: n/a
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Authority: golinofr
Review Comment: n/a
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 21 MAR 2002
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review History: RELEASED <21 MAR 2002 by worrelsw>; APPROVED <06 MAY 2002 by golinofr>
Review Markings:

Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
30 JUN 2005

Review Media Identifier:
Review Referrals: n/a
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: MASMOUDI CONCERNED ABOUT BOURGUIBA'S HEALTH
TAGS: PFOR, TS, US, (MASMOUDI, FONMIN MOHAMED), (BOURGUIBA)
To: STATE INFO ALGIERS
GENEVA
PARIS
RABAT
TRIPOLI
Type: TE
Markings: Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005

